



## **Subj: A message from Secretary Sharfstein: My plan for January 2015**

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Dear Colleagues in the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene,

I am writing to let you know that after Governor O'Malley's term ends in January, I will step down as Secretary to become the Associate Dean for Public Health Practice and Training at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. I am excited to join a team of scholars who are working to make the world healthier, safer, and more sustainable. The position will allow me to stay involved in my city of Baltimore and my state of Maryland, while engaging with national and global challenges and helping to train a new generation of public health leaders.

Nonetheless, it will be hard to say goodbye to the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. The last four years have been the most rewarding of my professional career. In a short period of time, the Department has confronted larger challenges, made bigger changes, and had greater successes than in previous decades. Together, we have:

- Transformed our state's unique system of hospital finance to support better health, not just more services;
- Reinvigorated public health across the state through consistent metrics, local coalitions, and innovative projects;
- Brought together treatment for substance use disorders and mental illness in a new Behavioral Health Administration;
- Transformed long-term care to allow thousands more Marylanders to age in place with dignity at home;
- Enhanced our state's health information exchange to support both clinical care and detailed maps of health care costs and preventable illness, as well as a state-of-the-art Prescription Drug Monitoring Program;
- Strengthened patient safety through regulatory and statutory changes related to compounding, cosmetic surgery, and routine oversight;
- Implemented programs in collaborations with our unions that have improved safety at our facilities;
- Established a program of regulation and inspections for facilities that perform surgical abortions that has drawn praise from across the political spectrum;
- Realized Lt. Governor Anthony Brown's vision of Health Enterprise Zones to address unjust and unacceptable health disparities across the state;
- Tackled the trend of youth cigar use;

- Promoted screening for domestic violence in partnership with medical professionals from across the state;
- Banned the sale of baby bumper pads that posed a suffocation risk to small infants;
- Supported concerted action on college drinking by our state's College Presidents;
- Created an interactive and real-time database to track the status of thousands of essential health facilities in an emergency;
- Built a state-of-the-art Public Health Laboratory in East Baltimore; and
- So much more.

This progress can be seen in the rise in Maryland's rankings in many areas, including infant mortality, dental care, health disparities, and the overall effectiveness of our health care system.

Some of the most rewarding parts of the job have been the most difficult. After three homicides at the Clifton T. Perkins Hospital Center, we brought in expert consultants, reorganized clinical care, and made major progress. Last year, Perkins received honors from the Joint Commission that accredits hospitals. I am indebted to Dr. Gayle Jordan-Randolph, Dr. Brian Hepburn, Dr. David Helsel, and the entire staff at Perkins.

In the fall of 2011, an audit revealed significant challenges facing Maryland's Board of Physicians. Working with Dr. Jay Perman and his team at the University of Maryland, and the Maryland General Assembly, we restructured the board and its staff. The Board is now much stronger in its protection of patients and in the level of service provided to physicians. Dr. Andrea Mathias, the Board chair during this transition, Dr. Devinder Singh, the new board chair, and the rest of their colleagues on the Board and the staff deserve tremendous credit.

After more than a decade of struggles with the Developmental Disabilities Administration, the Department is finally addressing longstanding audit findings and building the foundation of a successful and modern agency. I will always be grateful to Patrick Dooley, the team at Alvarez and Marsal, Bernard Simons, and the staff of DDA for their tireless efforts.

If fixing problems is part of the job, so too is owning up to them. The IT problems of the Maryland Health Benefit Exchange last year are certainly not going to make my highlight reel. I do remember, however, the moment when Governor Martin O'Malley pulled me aside and told me that what mattered most was rising to the challenge.

Incredibly, thanks to the efforts of so many across the state, more than 375,000 of our friends and neighbors have enrolled in coverage, and there have been sharp drops in the number of uninsured seen by clinics and hospitals. The heroic efforts of our Medicaid team, led by Chuck Milligan, played a central role in this comeback. As a result of the extraordinary skills and leadership of Secretary of the Department of Information Technology Isabel FitzGerald, we are now on a path to a vastly improved and upgraded website this fall.

In thinking back on all we have accomplished, I would like to acknowledge the key role of counsel from our Office of the Attorney General. The Office's leader and our Principal Counsel, Joshua Auerbach, is a brilliant lawyer with remarkable intellect, judgment, and passion for putting the law to good use.

Dr. Laura Herrera and Fran Phillips have overseen a transformation of our state's approach to public health that is now attracting attention from across the nation. I have yet to find an administrative problem that fazes Thomas Kim; his steadiness has helped the Department through a range of challenges. Dr. Tricia Nay is devoted to strengthening our oversight of facilities across the state through the Office of Health Care Quality. The Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities, until recently led by Dr. Carlessia Hussein, has helped the entire Department focus on critical aspects of health equity. And I have deeply appreciated the guiding hand and support of Lisa Ellis from my very first day on the job.

Public agencies thrive when state leaders support them. Governor O'Malley and Lt. Governor Brown, together with the leadership of the Maryland General Assembly, have supported DHMH and our critical mission in innumerable ways. While other states are abandoning investments in health and health care, Maryland has embraced them.

I have observed from a front-row seat how the Governor and Lt. Governor care deeply and personally about advancing opportunity and health for the people of Maryland. Their values are reflected in policies that produce results -- policies that have led to more children growing up healthy, more individuals with disabilities living independently, more families thriving, and more seniors aging with dignity. It has been an incredible privilege to serve with my fellow cabinet officials on a team devoted to progress in Maryland.

The greatest honor has been to serve with each of you. Your dedication to improving the health of our state, and the skills that you bring to the job, have inspired me each day.

I look forward to staying in touch from my new vantage point next year. Until then, I will be fully engaged in the tasks at hand. My key goals for the remainder of the year include controlling an epidemic of drug overdoses, helping to fix our state exchange, further strengthening patient safety, advancing plans to integrate behavioral health, and advancing collaboration between public health and the health care system.

As we work together on these and other critical projects, there is no reason for goodbyes-- just the opportunity to be sure our paths will cross again.

Sincerely,

***Josh***

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